

Running out: Shoe retailers adapt to changing of - Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (WI) - March 3, 1993 - page 1D

March 3, 1993 | Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (WI) | CATHY BREITENBUCHER Sentinel correspondent | Page 1D

Check out North Lake Drive any weekend morning and you will see them.

Runners some alone, some in pairs, some with a dog for companionship will be there, pursuing their favorite form of exercise.

Chances are, those people with a spring in their step also have some gray in their hair.

Yes, runners are aging just like the rest of the population, and it is that fact of demographics that is providing a challenge for those who sell them shoes.

In the past six months, two east side Milwaukee stores devoted to running shoes and gear have gone out of business.

Running on Prospect, 2111 N. Prospect Ave., closed up shop in September. Rodiez's Eastbay, 2338 N. Farwell Ave., followed suit early this year.

"I think there's somewhat of a decline in people running," said Sid Baskin, a Milwaukee running events promoter and longtime runner.

"The average age of the runner in Wisconsin is going up and the younger people, say 22 to 30, aren't coming into it to the degree they used to."

The Rodiez family has consolidated its retailing efforts at 10903 W. Lincoln Ave., West Allis.

Formerly known as Rodiez's Westbay, the business now goes by the name Rodiez's Running Store. Tom Rodiez owns 51% of the store and is president.

Rodiez's son, Tony, who owns the other 49%, agrees with Baskin's observations about the shortage of younger runners.

A 36-year-old winner of numerous events, including the 1979 Al's Run, Tony Rodiez sees more contemporaries than young lions on the local running scene.

"What I notice is in the age group 20 to 24, you don't see the kids continuing their running career after high school or college," said Rodiez. "In a lot of the road races, the majority of runners are over the age of 30."

Armen Hadjinian, owner of Running on Prospect, declined to discuss the details of his store's 1992 closing.

Tony Rodiez and others paint a picture of shifting demand and purchasing patterns in the running

shoe retail business. For example:

{ } In spite of the talk of a fitness boom, fewer people are becoming runners.

The Badgerland Striders, a Milwaukee running club, has seen little growth in its membership during the past decade, according to President Glenn Wargolet.

"We have about 1,200 members and when I first was president in 1983, we had about 1,200," Wargolet said. "We don't see the new people coming in and they might be the ones likely to buy two or three new pairs of shoes a year."

A nationwide survey by the National Sporting Goods Association backs Wargolet's observation.

The survey showed 22.5 million people identifying themselves as runners in 1991, down from 29.5 million seven years earlier.

"Activities are picking up that are fitness-related, but they're not running," said Larry Weindruch, a spokesman for the association, based in Mount Prospect, Ill. "Aerobics is up and the sale of home exercise equipment was really up in '91."

"What it says is running may be slipping. Those of us in the baby boom generation are finding other ways to stay fit."

{ } Nationwide, during the past decade, sales of running shoes declined. According to the NSGA, sales dropped by nearly 2 million pairs of shoes from 1981 to 1991. Sales fluctuate from year to year, Weindruch noted, and can be difficult to predict.

For example, NSGA data showed sales of 19.4 million pairs of running shoes in 1984, when the Los Angeles Olympics helped focus public attention on the sport. In 1988, sales were 11.8 million.

The 1984 figure has proved to be the highest since the NSGA began keeping count in 1980.

{ } More retailers are competing for the running shoe dollar. Once limited to the sporting goods and athletic footwear stores, runners now can get their shoes through discount mail-order houses, at runners' expos at major races, at factory outlet stores and elsewhere.

Despite a limited selection of running shoes at department and discount stores, retailers such as JC Penney, K mart and Wal-Mart accounted for nearly 40% of the running shoes sold in 1991, the most recent year for which the NSGA has figures.

Those associated with independent, smaller stores have noticed the competition.

"The mid-range shoes, you can get them at a Kohl's Department Store," noted Brad Patterson, a sales associate at Movin' Shoes of Milwaukee, 6419 W. North Ave. "A store like ours, we don't have the capital to do that advertising."

{ } Fewer runners are competing and there are fewer races from which they can choose.

Competitive runners tend to purchase shoes more often and want the latest innovations.

While the Badgerland Striders list nearly 500 events statewide in their 1993 running calendar, many depend heavily on fitness and recreational walkers for entrants.

Walkers actually outnumbered runners by 553 at the venerable Al's Run in 1992.

The addition of the walking category to an event multiplies the race director's duties and headaches.

"A lot of the race directors have other jobs. Organizing races isn't their major job," said Baskin. "After three or four years, volunteer race directors burn out and, in some cases, the race goes under."

Despite the obstacles, Tony Rodiez is determined to hold onto the niche he helped carve in the early days of Eastbay, whose roots go back to the beginning of the running boom.

His West Allis store is brightly lit and features racks of colorful running clothing and wall racks filled with the latest shoes by five leading manufacturers. Posters of Olympic champions, including Joan Benoit and Gail Devers, offer inspiration.

A large back room provides a place for Rodiez to offer shoe seminars for runners, such as a February session with a technical representative of Nike.

Shoe manufacturers' distribution policies ensure Rodiez's Running Store will have a better selection of new merchandise than catalogs or factory outlet stores, Rodiez said.

"Sometimes a sales rep will call us with some closeouts at a good price, but we tell them we're not interested," Rodiez said. "We always want to go forward. We don't want to bring the old stuff in."

Rodiez said the store's philosophy was to provide the latest in shoes, sold by experienced runners who know the product.

"I think there's always going to be a market out there," Rodiez said. "Eventually, if it came time to carry other styles of shoes, we'd consider something like that. We've talked about volleyball. I've had people tell me there's a need for that."

Eastbay was born in 1978 at 1229 E. Brady St. By the early '80s, there were franchises in Waukesha, Stevens Point and Wausau.

The Waukesha store on West Blue Mound Road suffered when a road-widening project sent many drivers looking for alternative routes, Rodiez said. The store was closed in April 1992.

The Wausau store which recently purchased exclusive use of the Eastbay name concentrates on an extensive mail-order catalog that includes shoes for many sports besides running.

The Stevens Point store, now closed, was an offshoot of the Wausau Eastbay.

Rodiez said the West Allis location had January 1993 sales in excess of the east side and Waukesha stores combined.

Eastbay moved from Brady Street to its Farwell Avenue location in April 1990.

While that address did provide better parking for patrons, Rodiez said many potential customers simply missed seeing the store in a recessed strip mall on the left side of a busy, one-way street.

The final blows were two break-ins in early November and on Dec. 23. Thieves took thousands of dollars worth of apparel, including Gore-Tex running suits carrying price tags of nearly \$300 each.

The strain of moving merchandise from the West Allis store to the east side store during the holiday buying period proved to be too much.

Rodiez said the business did not seriously consider a different east side location.

"We thought of going farther, toward Mequon, with another store," he said. "But if we continue to be successful (in West Allis), we'll probably go with one store.

"With the economy, we'll be careful."

Employees besides Rodiez and his father, there are three part-timers still are getting used to answering the telephone with the store's new name. Rodiez said it was difficult to part with the Eastbay name that for years meant running in Milwaukee.

"It was emotional. I think about it a lot," he said. "We still have the old sign that used to hang at Brady Street.

"When I was at Brady Street from late 1979 to 1986, I loved it there. I knew all the customers, and you still see some of those faces at races.

"We had the chairs and a stack of (running) magazines, and people would come in just to read."

CITATION (TURABIAN STYLE)

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